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ABSTRACT

The steps which led to the establishment of the Open University in Great Britain and the intentions of its founders are first described, with particular attention paid to the needs it was intended and not intended to meet. Following this is an examination of the evidence to date of the University's success in reaching its target student population. Included are data on the social and educational characteristics of the student body and a discussion of the staying power of students from different backgrounds. The third section of the paper provides an analysis of the instructional system of the University and the place of correspondence materials within that system. Also described are the fail-safe strategies aimed at helping students to avoid dropping out. Next, some studies are cited which compare costs in the Open University with those of conventional institutions in England. Finally, an assessment of the Open University's potential as an instrument of democratization is offered. (Author)

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THE OPEN UNIVERSITY'S ROLE IN A DEMOCRACY

Introduction

When I met Theodore Roszak, author of Making of a Counter-Culture, in 1969, the idea of an Open University appalled him. He seemed to see it as a technocratic monster, dehumanising its students and likely to be used as an indoctrinating tool in the hands of the governing elite. Today, four years later, I can say that his worst dreams have not been realised, and that I believe the Open University is playing an important role in the British democracy. I should like to tell you how this has happened.

How and Why the Open University was Established

In the first part of this paper, I shall describe to you how the British Open University was established and what were the social and political intentions of its founders. In particular, I shall identify the needs that the University was designed to meet, and some it was not intended to meet.

Nobody is quite sure who thought of the British Open University first. Of course, broadcasting and correspondence methods have been used in education in many countries, including Britain, for a long time now. Dr. Michael Young was one of the first to put forward the notion of an institution of higher education that would teach at a distance using several media, among them broadcasting. In fact, his National Extension College in Cambridge began teaching courses (at the pre-university level) in this way before the Open University even had its Royal Charter.

Mr. Harold Wilson, then Prime Minister at the head of a Labour Government, put the idea firmly into the political arena. He saw the 'University of the Air', as it was then known, as offering a second chance to people who had been deprived of an opportunity for higher education, for whatever reason.

Inevitably, the idea became the plaything of politicians and pressure-groups. In general, the Conservatives saw the proposed institution as not a proper university. The title 'University of the Air' prompted derisive remarks about students getting a degree by doing little more than watching the 'telly'.

On the other hand, there were social idealists who saw the University as a panacea. They hoped that thousands of working-class people, deprived of higher education by the British selective system of secondary schooling, would enroll and obtain degrees. Others were more sceptical and said that working-class people would be slow to enroll and quick to drop out.

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THE OPEN UNIVERSITY'S ROLE IN A DEMOCRACY

Summary

This paper begins by describing the steps that led to the establishment of the Open University in Great Britain and the intentions of its founders. In particular, it describes the needs that the University was intended to meet, within the higher education sector. It also identifies some needs that the University was not intended to meet.

The second section of the paper is an examination of evidence to date of the success of the University in reaching its target student population. It includes data on the social and educational characteristics of this student body, and discusses briefly the 'staying power' of students from different backgrounds.

The third section of the paper is an analysis of the instructional system of the University and the place of correspondence materials within that system. The paper describes the University's 'fail-safe' strategies aimed at helping students to avoid dropping out.

Finally, the paper offers some figures comparing costs of the Open University with those of the conventional universities in England, and discusses possible trends of development. It assesses the University's potential as an instrument of 'external democratisation'.

Prepared by Professor David Hawkridge, Director of the Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University, Milton Keynes, England, for the Leidse Onderwijsintellingen Jubilee Congress at Den Haag, Netherlands, October, 1973.

Yet another group saw the possibility of saving money by providing mass higher education through the Open University at a lower cost than in the traditional universities. Needless to say, this group affiliated itself more with the Conservatives than with the Labour Party.

When Mr. Wilson gave the proposal to one of his Cabinet, Jennie Lee, to carry foward, she set up a Planning Committee. It is to the report of that Committee that we should turn, and to the University's Charter, granted in 1969, to discover what the intentions were for the University. Both these documents did not speak of the University being set up primarily to serve one social class or another. Undoubtedly the broad socialistic aims of the Labour Party would be well served by an institution that increased equality of educational opportunity among the population. The long experience of the WEA (Workers' Education Association) and similar groups in Britain must have been warning enough, however, that the Open University could not possibly become an institution primarily for the working class, compensating instantly for the educational and cultural disadvantages suffered by that group.

The Open University is indeed open, and therefore able to serve those who wish to take the opportunities it offers, whatever social class they belong to. Its courses are open to adults irrespective of their age, occupation, or previous education, and no matter where they live in Britain or Northern Ireland. To enter the University, a student needs no formal educational qualifications, he can be in full-time employment (as most are), and he can study mainly at home in his spare time.

Some of our students never had the chance to attend university, others regret having missed an opportunity earlier in life. Some have the practical aims of increasing their chances of promotion at work, others have a more general interest in study and in finding themselves through its challenge to them personally. All our students are keen to continue their education by study in their own time and in their own homes.

All this sounds very grand and worthwhile. Sadly, however, merely providing a new educational opportunity is not enough to compensate for the disadvantages of working-class people. Nor is that provision enough if we wish to avoid the University becoming an institution primarily for the middle class.

Who is Studying in the Open University?

In the second part of this paper, I should like to show you some of the evidence we have so far of the success of the University in reaching various groups in the general adult population.

Public Knowledge of the University. First, we have some data on how many people knew about the Open University in January, 1971, the date teaching began. A public poll commissioned by the University (McIntosh, 1973a) showed that 31% of the adult population knew something of what it was, but fewer women than men, fewer older people than yougер, and very much fewer among the lower sociological groups (only 17% of the unskilled working class).

A year later, the overall percentage had risen from 31% to 40%, but still fewer women knew than men (McIntosh, 1973a). More of the middle-class people knew about the University, but not many more working-class people. In this second study, students were asked more precise questions about what they knew. The results showed 90% of those who had left school at 15 or earlier did not know that the University required no formal qualifications for entry (McIntosh, 1973a).

By January 1973, 44% of the adult population knew about the Open University, but the differences remained between the levels of information among men and women, and among different social classes (McIntosh, 1973b). Among those who had left school early there was an improvement to 30% compared with 10% a year before, but 90% of the unskilled working-class still thought they needed formal educational qualifications to enter.

Some Characteristics of the Students. Second, we know the occupations of those who actually entered the University each year, 1971, 1972, and 1973.

In 1971, we started the year with over 24,000 students, among whom 37% were teachers, 20% scientific and technical personnel of various kinds, 12% administrative, managerial and clerical personnel, and 9% housewives. About two-thirds continued in 1972, among whom 42% were teachers, 19% scientific and technical personnel, 11% administrative, managerial and clerical personnel, and 10% housewives. In other words, the teachers showed slightly greater staying power than the other main groups.

Among the 21,000 students who entered in 1972, there was a lower percentage of teachers (30%), about the same as 1971 for scientific and technical personnel (20%), an increase to 14% for administrative, managerial and clerical personnel, and a small increase to 11% for housewives.

The balance of men and women applicants in 1971 was 70:30, but this changed to 67:33 in 1972 and to 63:37 in 1973. More women stay in the University than men, and the students under 25 tend to withdraw more. Among the occupational groups, skilled manual workers withdrew most, at least in the initial 4 months of 1971 (McIntosh, 1973a).

Are the Students Mostly Middle-Class? From the evidence I have just given you, and from other supporting data, we might be tempted to say that the University is tending to be a place where people from working-class backgrounds or low-status occupations have a chance, certainly, but a chance to fail yet again. We might say that if you are middle-class, you will probably succeed in the Open University. Indeed, comparisons of the Open University's students with those of conventional British universities have been made, and our critics have said that the Open University is almost as middle-class in its students as the others.

So thirdly I want to compare the fathers' occupations for students in other universities with the fathers' occupations of our students, who of course are already adult. For the Open University, 67% of the fathers have or had occupations which could be called working-class. For other British universities the figure is very much lower (McIntosh, 1972). It is clear that the Open University has a large group of students who are moving up through the social and occupational strata since only 15-20% say they are in working-class occupations now.

In summary, people from the working class are succeeding in the Open University. Our students are not mostly middle-class teachers, nor are teachers the only ones to succeed. Moreover, the general success rate in the Open University is higher than in any other multi-media distance teaching system in higher education or at lower levels that I know of. What contributes to this success rate? In the next section I would like to tell you a little about the University's instructional system.

The Instructional System and the University's 'Fail-Safe' Strategies

In describing this system, I shall emphasise the 'fail-safe' strategies. These are strategies we employ to help students to avoid dropping out. They are not completely fail-safe, since about one-third of the students do drop out in their first year.

Correspondence Material. The core of the instruction is the correspondence material. This material consists of exposition accompanied by a variety of exercises, some of which the student can check for himself; the others he sends to be graded by the University's computer or to be commented upon and graded by his tutor.

Within the correspondence material there are several 'fail-safe' strategies. For example, in some courses there are alternative routes through the material. A student in difficulties can turn to remedial

portions of the text. He knows when he is in difficulty through his performance on the exercises. Some units offer him advice on what to omit if he has fallen behind. Since the courses are strictly paced by the broadcasts and the unrelenting dates when exercises are due to be mailed to the computer or the tutor, a good number of students do fall behind at some point in the course.

Other Texts. The correspondence material is not the only reading the student has to do. He is expected to read certain books, some of them published specially for the University. All his reading will occupy 8-10 hours a week if he is following one full-credit course or its equivalent.

Broadcasts. For such courses, the student also watches 3 or 4 television broadcasts a month and listens to the same number of radio broadcasts. As a further 'fail-safe' measure for the student, each broadcast is repeated once, at a different time, so that students normally have one opportunity to view during the working week and one at the weekend.

Face-to-Face Help. For students who feel they need face-to-face help, the University provides tutors and counsellors. These are part-time staff of the University, meeting students chiefly in the 280 study centres established throughout Britain and Northern Ireland. The tutors are subject-matter specialists, the counsellors are generalists. Both are important in helping students to avoid dropping out. The tutor is able to assess his students' progress through the exercises he receives from them, and contact them by mail or telephone, or at the study centre if they attend. The University passes details of students' grades to their counsellors, who are also in touch with their students by these various means.

Summer School. For most of the courses, students are required to attend a residential summer school for one week. There is some evidence from discussions with students that the summer school is an additional 'fail-safe' measure. For some, the school comes at a critical point in the course when they feel they cannot continue. At the school they find other students in difficulties, as well as others who are getting on well. In conversations with their peers, as well as with summer school tutors, failing students seem to find new courage to go on, and the motivational effect of the summer schools should not be underestimated. First-year students who reach summer school are very likely to reach the end-of-year examinations: in 1971, 18,560 students

were on file at the end of summer schools, and 18,373 took the examinations.

Other Means. The University uses other means to teach certain courses, such as 170 computer terminals in study centres to teach computing, experimental kits sent to students taking science and technology courses, gramophone records for music courses, audio-tapes for some technology and education courses, and so on. All of these contribute to the University's multi-media approach to teaching, which offers students opportunities to learn in many different modes. I should remind you, however, that the printed materials are the main medium, occupying most of the students' time, even in science. The Open University has been criticised by some for its print-oriented system, but this is the system in which people from the working class have succeeded to a quite remarkable extent already.

The Future for the Open University

In the last part of this paper, I should like to consider three questions about the future of the Open University. The role of an Open University in a democracy depends upon the answers that can be given to these questions. I cannot provide the answers with clarity at present, but there are some indications and some trends we may note. The questions are: (1) What kinds of courses will the Open University offer? (2) What kinds of students will the Open University draw? (3) Is the Open University going to be cost-effective? I believe these are questions that arise not only for the Open University but also for similar institutions in other countries.

Future Courses. The University at present produces most of its courses in its undergraduate programme and a few in its post-experience programme. Courses may be used in both programmes once they have been produced. The selection of courses for production is the responsibility of the University's committees, but there are differences in procedure reflecting a difference in the way the need for a particular course is identified. Undergraduate courses are selected with the need for a balanced academic profile for the University in mind, and to permit students to pursue particular combinations of subjects. They are not selected with a minimum market in mind, and some courses have less than 250 students enrolled each year. Post-experience course proposals on the other hand, are subjected to market research to find out whether a national market of 1,000 students a year is likely to exist. The market research is fairly rudimentary, since there are no economical techniques for discovering exactly how many students in the country are likely to enroll for a course not yet produced.

Students at present play only a minor role in determining the range of courses provided by the Open University. This may surprise people from other European countries, but it is still the practice in most British universities for these matters to be in the hands of the academics. In the Open University, there are also some special problems in involving students in the work of committees, since they are almost certainly in full-time employment as well as studying part-time.

Future undergraduate courses offered by the University are likely to be linked to student needs by being specialised. The University set out to offer multi-disciplinary courses at the first and second levels, but student demands as well as staff inclinations are for more specialised third and fourth level courses. The university has led the way by producing courses in new fields, such as technological design and the relationship between science and society. Some future courses are likely to be in such new fields, but there is a demand for older disciplines too.

In the post-experience programme, which has to generate its own revenue (unlike the subsidised undergraduate programme), the selection of future courses depends greatly on what needs can be detected in the country as a whole. For example, a large industrial organisation, public or private, wishing to fund a course could certainly approach the University. A condition of the course being produced would be that it would be nationally available, and that it would be likely to be useful to other students than those in the funding company or institution. Very few courses of this kind have been identified as yet. All we can really say about future post-experience courses is that they are likely to be highly vocational in nature, and that their development will probably be slower than that of the undergraduate courses.

Future Students. It is probably unwise to make predictions on the basis of only four years' applications, but there do seem to be some clear trends. The University seems likely to enroll more men than women for several years to come, but the ratio will change to nearer to 1:1. Similarly, the University seems likely to enroll for years ahead a large number of teachers, perhaps 20-30% of all students entering each year and 33% of those actually studying in any one year. The proportion of students actually in working-class occupations may increase slowly as working-class people gain awareness of the University and confidence in their ability to succeed in it.

The balance of undergraduates and post-experience students is likely to change slowly. At present it is about 15:1. Undergraduate totals are fixed by the level of grant received from the Government. Post-experience courses depend on direct student demand, which is not great as yet with the limited number of courses on offer.

A few hundred graduate students have been enrolled for research degrees, some working directly with staff at the University, but most working under supervisors based in other institutions of higher education who are paid to do the supervision on behalf of the Open University. The numbers of these graduate students will probably rise slowly to perhaps 1,000 by 1980.

These predictions are comparatively easy to make. What is far more difficult to predict is whether the Open University will succeed in teaching large numbers of students of 18-20 years of age. The age limit is at present 21 years. As from next January, however, the University will take in 500 younger students as a pilot project, half of them with normal university entrance qualifications and half without. It will make no special provision for them, the aim of the pilot project being to see whether they can succeed in the existing system.

If these younger students show themselves capable of studying successfully in the Open University, then the institution's future may be radically changed. British universities and student grant regulations do not encourage students to be employed while studying for a degree. The Open University by contrast expects many of its students to be employed. By 1980, the Open University may have a large number of younger students, in contrast to its present older student body. Predictions about the social characteristics of these students cannot be made yet.

If the younger students generally fail, there will be a sense of relief among those who believe the University's first responsibility is to the older students. Among the applicants for 1974, some 20,000 older students will be turned away for lack of places in the undergraduate programme.

Cost-Effectiveness. There have been very few studies yet of the University's cost-effectiveness. Two have been published to date by Wagner (1972, 1973). He tried to evaluate the costs of the Open University compared with those of conventional British universities. Using figures from the first three years of the University's development he concluded that whichever formula was used, the Open University was appreciably cheaper in recurrent costs and considerably cheaper in capital costs. Wagner is a staff member in the University's

Faculty of Social Sciences. An unpublished study by an economist at an American university provided similar conclusions. (I am not at liberty yet to quote the source.)

These studies may have to be supplemented soon, however, since the costs of the Open University are rising. The student enrollment and the income are rising too. The income is derived not only from government grants but also from student fees and from substantial sales of Open University materials, particularly in North America. Thus the figures in the equations need changing. The outcome of any new calculations still seems likely to be in favour of the Open University, since costs are rising for the other universities too, without much rise in income. There will be differences depending on whether we look at recurrent or capital costs, at costs per student, per course, or per graduate, or at costs set against life-time benefits. At present, I would certainly assert that the University is likely to continue to be cost-effective within most of these frames of reference.

Conclusion

This is the point at which I should return to the title of my paper, 'The Role of the Open University in a Democracy'. Speaking personally for a moment, may I say that I have lived under several kinds of democracy, under a racial oligarchy, and under a military junta. I retain a strong belief in the power of education to make democracy possible and workable.

Britain, with its long parliamentary tradition also has a long and continuing history of social struggle. Other countries have their own traditions of government, their own social struggles. Open learning systems such as the British Open University, far from being instruments of propaganda as perhaps Theodore Roszak feared, possess the capacity and offer the opportunities for 'democratisation' of large numbers of people who were previously deprived. I suggest to you that we are seeing the beginning of a great cycle of social revolution in which open learning systems will play a very prominent role, assisting those who are anxious to improve their education in ways that the formal school and university system cannot.

In this paper I have tried to put forward the grounds for my optimism. I have painted a picture of an innovative institution, but no longer an experimental one. I have illustrated the success of students in the Open University and I have made some predictions about the University's future. Needless to say, I am prejudiced, but I hope I have told you enough for you to form your own opinion about the role of the Open University in a democracy.

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